

POISON MENACE IN U.S. HOMES

822,000 ACCIDENTS IN YEAR

The British Pharmaceutical Conference in London heard from a leading American authority yesterday how vast is the problem of accidental poisoning in the United States and how pharmacists there have successfully organized various counter-measures.

The seriousness and extent of the problem, said Dr. Morton J. Rodman, Professor of Pharmacology at Rutgers State University, Newark, New Jersey, has become fully apparent only in the past few years as a result of efficient collection of data. In 1959, it is now known, 456 children under five died after accidental overdoses of drugs or from swallowing chemical substances never intended for human consumption.

Poisons killed more children than the combined fatalities from poliomyelitis, diphtheria, whooping cough, scarlet fever, rheumatic fever, and streptococcal infections during that year. The incidence of such accidents among toddlers was far higher than in any other age group. Another 1,000 people of all ages were known to have died of poisoning caused by something they took internally through mischance in their homes.

IMPROVED REPORTING

The results of improved case reporting, Dr. Rodman explained, indicate that nearly 600 cases of accidental chemical ingestion occur for each reported fatality, and the United States National Health Survey estimated that 822,000 poisonings occurred in the year ending June, 1959.

One fact revealed, he added, is that drugs and medicines are responsible for more poison cases than all other chemicals combined. Aspirin alone accounted for half of all drug deaths in children; barbiturates caused half of all accidental drug deaths among adults. Other internal medications commonly involved included laxatives, tranquilizers, and analgesics.

The other greatest single source of poison accidents was the introduction into the American home of some 250,000 chemical speciality products. They included insecticides, weed killers and rat poisons which caused trouble when they were transferred from their original labelled containers to all sorts of unsafe vessels. In addition, there were caustic cleansing agents, paint and varnish solvents, and furniture polishes which, until recently, were not labelled to show their potential toxicity if misused, or even the nature of their chemical contents.

GROUP ADVICE

Pharmacists, Dr. Rodman said, were frequently called on to help in poisoning emergencies caused by these products. But they often found themselves helpless to offer assistance in cases of poisoning by trade-named household speciality products. This frustration led to those in the public health professions deciding to pool their resources so that they might better collect and disseminate information about poison accidents. About two years ago 462 such groups were represented in the American Association of Poison Control centres.

The emphasis in various educational efforts that Dr. Rodman enumerated was on such points as: (1) the desirability of storing all potentially poisonous substances out of the reach of children, in their original containers, and away from shelves where food is kept; (2) the importance of reading the label before using a chemical product and of knowing the best means of destroying the remnants of medicine and household chemicals; and (3) the need to avoid taking medicines in the dark and the inadvisability of referring to flavoured or brightly coloured medicines as "candy".

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